

BOOK REVIEW**PERSPECTIVES ON CONGREGATIONAL LEADERSHIP:
APPLYING SYSTEMS THINKING FOR
EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP**

BY: ISRAEL GALINDO

RICHMOND, VA: EDUCATIONAL CONSULTANTS, 2009

210 PP. PAPERBACK

ISBN: 978-09715765-7-5

Casting his book as “a collection of ‘deviant perspectives’ on congregational leadership based on concepts in Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST),” Dr. Galindo encourages pastoral leaders to move away from “tricks, techniques, and pragmatic quick fix[es]” and engage a perspective that brings insight for the complexity of human systems (3-4). Becoming learners of and applying the BFST perspective requires leaders to first understand and address their own family of origin dynamics and be vigilant about how these dynamics play out in leaders’ current relationships and emotional environments. In other words, pastoral leaders inherit the generations of the past—their own and the organization or congregation’s—and BFST enables leaders to identify these unseen or below-the-surface forces in order to lead more effectively.

The book is divided into three sections. The first presents the basics of the theory, the second offers insights for leadership from BFST, and the third applies BFST to congregations and organizations. Since much of the writing originated in Dr. Galindo’s blog, all the sections contain pithy, eye-catching topics.

After an introduction that inspires pastoral leaders to become “a positive deviant in the system, a person whose capacity to think and function differently than others in the system brings about healthy change,” Galindo explains that BFST starts with one’s self and a continual quest to become self-differentiated (1). This enables leaders to be free of over-functioning—becoming fused with and adopting others’ anxieties and responsibilities as

their own, which potentially leads to burnout. Effective leaders deal with their own anxiety, but do not rescue the system. Self-differentiation also occurs when leaders understand their own role in their family of origin, discern how that role plays out in their leadership, and behave according to their own values and principles rather than their feelings. Lack of self-differentiation causes leaders to react without reflection and intention, which may temporarily address symptoms, but in the long run does not deal with the root issues of the problem.

The first section also discusses homeostasis. According to BSFT, a system's energy is directed toward staying at or returning to homeostasis. Therefore, change introduced to the system is resisted or even sabotaged. Leaders who understand this principle are more likely to remain tenacious in the midst of change.

The second section integrates BFST with leadership by conveying lists of leadership axioms based on Galindo's many years of experience in education, leadership, and consulting. Examples include: "Four Goals of the Organizational Leader," "Five Personal Resources for Leadership," "Five Concepts of Leadership," and "Back to the Basics: Leadership Rules 101." Again, the themes of family of origin, self-differentiation, and non-reactivity are present, along with exhortations to understand one's context and operate within one's own principles. Galindo particularly urges leaders to understand "pastoral triangles." In BFST, triangles are used to identify how relationship dynamics manifest anxiety or how relationships get patterned. Pastors are continually drawn into triangles with persons (pastor plus two others) or one person and an issue. It is important for them to recognize the triangle, avoid reactivity, and only function on their side of the triangle, what they can address or control, which is only themselves and their responses.

The third section applies BFST to congregational and organizational leadership by offering insights from short, case-specific scenarios previously discussed on Galindo's blog. Most of the forty-seven scenarios are one or two

pages, with the longest being ten pages in length. Although it is impossible to summarize these varied sections briefly, the themes of discerning one's context and taking responsibility for one's actions and interactions, and in like manner encouraging others to take responsibility, stand out. In general, however, this section is a compilation of Galindo's ministry philosophy.

Perspectives on Congregational Leadership dances between theory, experience, and reflection, with the sharing of experiences and reflection being more dominant. It is insightful in offering the reality of systems theory in organizations and therefore why leadership is messy and sometimes does not work. The book provides a theoretical backdrop for self-awareness, self-management, and self-discipline, along with self-reflection tools such as "Traits of a Well-Defined Leader" and "The Imaginative Leader." Finally, the descriptive Table of Contents enables one to use the book for situations we all face, such as "How to Handle a Dysfunctional Staff Colleague" and "How Could They Act That Way?"

Shelley Trebesch is Assistant Professor of Leadership and Organization Development, School of Intercultural Studies and the Max De Pree Center for Leadership, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California

